

FRANCES BONNER

cultures of fame and fandom

SU HOLMES AND SEAN REDMOND (EDS)

Framing Celebrity

Routledge, London, 2006

ISBN 9780415377096 (hb)

9780415377102 (pb)

RRP £70.00 (hb) £18.00 (pb)

Writing on celebrity never involves having to search for a contemporary instance to bounce off, only selecting among those clamouring for attention. The most insistent of the stories getting Australian media coverage as I write is the exposé of rugby legend Andrew Johns's ten years undetected and/or unreported, but hardly private, drug use (revealed when he was found with a single tablet of ecstasy at the Notting Hill Carnival). The initial news stories were followed by a 'tearful confession' on *The Footy Show*, a rash of news stories, backgrounders and commentaries by friends and fellow players as well as linked stories calling for a range of responses—from a national sports drug testing policy to a proper discussion of the widespread practice of recreational drug use. It would have been a gift to a reviewer, except such gifts are always available and I could rather have chosen from the same couple of days, the tenth anniversary of Princess Diana's death, Hollywood Frat Packer Owen Wilson's suicide attempt, Nicole Richie serving thirty-five minutes of a four-day prison sentence, even perhaps the revelation that the playwright Arthur Miller had concealed the existence of a disabled son. The pervasiveness of celebrity coverage is frequently lamented, even (hypocritically) by the media itself, but the socio-cultural work it performs still needs attention. At times the contributors to this book seem more interested in adding new areas in which celebrity is operating than in exploring the consequences of the expansion, but overall it is a publication to be welcomed.

It has long seemed to me that one of the most valuable contributions to the study of celebrity has been wrongly overlooked.

Ian Connell's article on British tabloid coverage of celebrity¹ came out in 1992, yet its discussion of tabloid stories' shrill denunciations of the failings of the famous who had only shortly before been lauded has only grown in pertinence as both the range of outlets devoted to celebrity culture and the sheer numbers of celebrities have grown. Only one of the essays in Su Holmes and Sean Redmond's collection refers to it, but that piece, Sofia Johansson's examination of tabloid readers' attitudes to celebrity stories in UK papers *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*, which concludes the collection, is one of the most innovative and valuable of the pieces here—even if frustratingly short. Johansson surveyed fifty-five young working-class and lower-middle-class readers of the two papers and reports just enough of their opinions to support Connell's argument. As well as the mild enjoyment at the diversion they offer, the readers' talk about the celebrities covered by the papers was marked by 'frustration, resentment and anger' (352) at the revelations of social inequality. The stories of social mobility which revealed the possibility of escape from their own everyday lives and of the shared situations (single motherhood for example) hit up against the stark difference having substantial financial resources made. In such situations Connell's analysis of tabloid stoking of resentment at people who had it all and still misbehaved remains powerful.

And yet celebrity coverage of 1992 was of a different order, most particularly in the absence of those routes to fame provided by reality television and the changes which Graeme Turner names 'the demotic turn'.² Certainly the aca-

demic analysis of the phenomenon was slight: a few books on stars like those by Braudy, deCordova, Dyer and Schickel; and John Langer's article on the television personality.³ Now it is quite reasonable to talk of the field of celebrity studies. *Framing Celebrity* appears only just after P. David Marshall's massive *The Celebrity Culture Reader*,⁴ making most academics with a solid interest in the area need to devote at least a whole bookshelf to their holdings.

Situating the Johansson piece with its empirical endorsement of Connell's contentions at the very end of the book positions it as far as possible from the opening move and claims. This is not to suggest that it offers a counter-argument to what has preceded it; it is properly located given both the book's organisation and its being the sole empirically based contribution. The collection's subtitle, *New Directions in Celebrity Culture*, is very much a statement of intent. Holmes and Redmond assert that the aim of the collection is 'to situate the study of stars and celebrities in relation to new and under-researched sites of analysis' (5) by looking at how new technologies, formats and post-modern sensibilities have transformed fame. Furthermore, this follows a description of Redmond's performance before his New Zealand students as the wannabe celebrity Leif Memphis—a turn sure to be stolen, sorry, referenced, by young teachers giving celebrity lectures everywhere (I excuse older ones solely on the basis of their probable lack of conviction in the role, though that probably wouldn't stop all of us). The collection does indeed push at the boundaries of established practice, not so

much (with one exception) in going where none have previously gone, more through the range covered in a single book and through the balance of its attention. More of the pieces are focused on fans; although the term 'stars and celebrities' is frequently employed, very little attention at all is paid to film stars; and, most unusually for contemporary celebrity studies, there is very little on what Chris Rojek calls 'celetoids'.⁵

The twenty essays in the book are organised into four groups—Fame Now, Fame Body, Fame Simulation and Fame Damage—and the editors provide a general introduction plus a separate one for each section as well as each writing individual essays, both placed in Fame Now. Matt Hills's chapter uses *Dr Who* fandom to explore the phenomenon of subcultural celebrity by considering the case of Big Name Fans (BNFs), especially those who achieve a degree of limited renown by transferring in some way into the 'real world' of television production, through scriptwriting or more technical skills. Several times he worries, quite rightly, about the particularity of *Dr Who* and thus the transferability of his argument.

Even outside the Fame Body section, the focus on corporeality is evident and admirable. Whether or not we agree with the editors' assertion that the body is now more important than the face (122), it now receives at least as much attention in media coverage. Two articles formally placed in Fame Body are concerned with pornography: John Mercer's study of the gay male video porn star; and Adam Knee's work on celebrity skin magazines and websites that mix mainstream celebrities with porn

ones, uniting the images by a focus on the body and a presentation which stresses both the illicit, and thereby the authentic, character of the images. The others look at the black athletic body (through Serena Williams), *heat* magazine and a historical reminder of the promotion of spectacular male bodies in the 1920s.

Among the essays that dwell on the body, but are placed elsewhere, is the article that ventures beyond the existing celebrity frame: Catherine Fowler's consideration of Sam Taylor-Wood's video portrait of the sleeping David Beckham. This is a most insightful piece focusing on what the gallery location of this celebrity piece tells us both of the particular instance and the more usual coverage of celebrities. What we are to assume is her own diary of the encounter with the artwork is interspersed with her analysis, and we learn that she spent almost the entire sixty-seven minutes the video lasts sitting before it, noting the moves made by Beckham, napping after a training session with Real Madrid. She also notes other visitors staying for shorter periods of time. The duration of the encounter with the 'live' celebrity subject and the peculiar public/private location of the enclosure within the gallery make this a distinctive instance of celebrity coverage. It is not that celebrities in the gallery are rare—Fowler herself notes other celebrity-based works by Taylor-Woods and other artists like Warhol who convert celebrity images into gallery material. In the last two or three years I have myself visited many exhibitions where the subject was celebrity photography or general photography that included many celebrity subjects. (On at least one occasion, the images were the work of

Juergen Teller, the subject here of an insightful essay by Adrienne Lai.) Galleries can be as celebrity-obsessed as other cultural sites. I saw Taylor-Wood's piece myself in Liverpool, not the (British) National Portrait Gallery location Fowler describes, and recognise the weight of most of her observations. In Liverpool though, the work wasn't located in a separated darkened space, nor were there seats to encourage lingering, as was the case at the Portrait Gallery, so nothing signalled the possibility of spending the extra time with the celebrity that Fowler considers. She concludes by pondering 'the binary experience' of watching the video, with the promise of the greater intimacy of watching someone (an actual celebrity!) sleeping, with the constant interruptions reminding the viewer that they are themselves on view to the other gallery-goers.

Other instances of intimacy with celebrity are explored in the fan-based articles, most particularly Kristina Busse's examination of boy band fan fiction, in particular *NSYNC pop-slash. She notes the two main varieties, those where the fanwriter inserts herself or her alter ego into the story to meet the celebrity and those where this doesn't happen and the story observes the interactions between the singers themselves. Like many of the contributors to this collection, Busse deploys the concept of parasocial interaction, arguing (as do most others) that this need not be a negative phenomenon, in her case because the production of fan fiction may facilitate actual social interaction with other such fans. Redmond's own essay, entitled 'Intimate Fame Everywhere' and concerned with celebrity/fan relations, provides

a particular take on many of the concerns of the book often through the vector of ordinariness. It concludes though with a concern with Fame Damage that foreshadows what is to come.

In giving over a fifth of the book to the consideration of 'Fame Damage', the editors are acknowledging that this is now a significant scholarly concern, but it is not one that has yet managed to cohere. The section introduction does an exemplary job of providing a coherent setting for the disparate essays, arguing that the prevalence of confessional and therapeutic cultures which characterise much celebrity coverage can 'be connected to what might be called the will to publicly enact and witness destruction amidst the despair and decay of the (post)-modern age'. (289) David Schmid's study of the serial killer stands out for its rather dated critical apparatus. There are no 'postmodern sensibilities' here, but the problem it enunciates of how broadly to locate the damage fame does to and through what he terms the 'idols of destruction' is worth pondering.

For someone fighting her way as I have been through the mass of Andrew Johns coverage which moved swiftly from depicting him as an undetected drug cheat to a person struggling with depression, and then a revision of that into bipolar disorder, Stephen Harper's analysis of mental illness narratives was valuable. He is concerned with the creativity-madness nexus and traces a shift from biographies in which male geniuses triumph over adversity while female ones don't, to more recent studies of rock stars, including Joy Division singer Ian Curtis (currently the subject of the biopic *Control*). His stress on the gender differences where

women are presented within a tragic/hysterical framework while males more often receive a jokey approach, tied in with the stories of Johns's utterly unconvincing attempts to disguise himself with woollen hats while partying in Sydney nightclubs. Harper's suggestion that readers respond to such stories with a combination of prurience, concern and admiration (322) seems very persuasive.

There remain two essays which need special acknowledgement. Deborah Jermyn's discussion of Sarah Jessica Parker fruitfully picks away again at the specificity of the TV star, noting how quintessentially SJP fits the role with her fashion-savviness being able to compensate for her lack of conventional beauty. As a continuing central character in a long-running program exemplifying (American) quality popular television, Parker is a well-chosen example to explore the televisual/cinematic distinction. The intensity of relationships between audience and star that the longevity of *Sex and the City* allowed is deemed especially relevant.

Lastly, Su Holmes's own essay is carefully constructed, as one would expect of someone who is so attentive to the area. She is concerned with celebrity reality shows, most particularly *I'm a Celebrity, Get me Out of Here*. Set in Queensland, but featuring British celebrities who have rarely been heard of in Australia, this occupies a strange position in international celebrity coverage, popular and academic. Australians know of it, yet it all seems odd and even more inconsequential than usual. The series Holmes examines is the quite rich one where the English glamour model⁶ Jordan, in transition to at least partial reclamation of her

original name, Katie Price, and Australian singer, Peter Andre, met and fell in love. Much of the essay looks at Jordan/Katie. Holmes traces the work the participants engage in as they manoeuvre to attract audience votes through revealing their 'real' selves, but trying to make sure these offer continuities to their celebrity personae. Simultaneously, they try to revive their careers after the show and the presenters send their activities up. Much of the viewer pleasure, Holmes assures us, and I think she is right, comes from observing the central motor of the show: the manufacture of celebrity.

It may always be the case that editors of collections are at the mercy of their contributors and that the book they envisage is not quite the book they are able to deliver. The desire for 'new and under-researched' areas was obviously a very powerful impetus in choosing the essays in *Framing Celebrity*, but this does not present a coherent argument. It is to the editors' credit that the section introductions do such good work in placing and augmenting the individual chapters. A reader dipping in only to a chapter or two would miss a very admirable contribution to the area.

A final note: this may be the first ever book, and certainly the only one in the cultural studies field, to have an index entry for 'emus, taken for walks'. The page reference takes one not only to Holmes' essay but that section of it concerned with the ordinariness of the contestants!

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1. Ian Connell 'Personalities in the Popular Media' in P. Dahlgren and C. Sparks (eds), *Journalism and Popular Culture*, London, Sage, 1992, pp. 64–83
 2. Graeme Turner 'The Mass Production of Celebrity: "Celestoids", Reality TV and the "Demotic Turn"', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2006, 153–65.
 3. Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986; Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*, Atheneum, New York, 1971; Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Ill., 1990; Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America*, Doubleday, New York, 1985; John Langer, 'Television's "Personality System"', *Media Culture and Society*, no. 4, 1981, pp. 351–65.
 4. P. David Marshall, *The Celebrity Culture Reader*, Routledge, London, 2006.
 5. 'Celestoid' was coined to name those previously ordinary people who are given intense short-term exposure as a consequence of a scandal or appearance on reality TV. Chris Rojek, *Celebrity*, Reaktion Books, London, 2001, pp. 20–3.
 6. The term 'glamour model' is a specifically British usage to account for women who were once more simply 'page three girls', famed for their busts and provocative poses. Without the tabloid papers on which the job description depends, Australian equivalents are only just coming into being and tend to be referred to awkwardly as 'FHM models' or even 'starlets'.